Cana
John 2:1-11
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In 1950 Ernest Hemingway wrote to a friend: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast..." (A Moveable Feast,Frontispiece).

I wonder if that is not something of what the friends of Jesus felt when, years later, they found themselves telling and retelling the story of a wedding they had attended once in Cana. Just as He had transformed the significance of the simple act of breaking bread and sharing a cup for them, so every wedding, every happy, joyful occasion, was a vivid reminder of His presence. The wedding in Cana summed up so much of the meaning of their experience with Jesus that it was their "moveable feast".

The author of the Fourth Gospel, writing perhaps seventy - eighty - ninety years after the fact called it a sign. "This, the first of His signs," John wrote, "Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him." And if we simply take seriously his designation of "sign" we will be spared the somewhat silly inquiries into how in the world water becomes wine. A sign exists to direct attention somewhere else. It is a distortion of a sign's function to focus too much attention on it. It points elsewhere. If you've ever been so busy reading road signs that you got lost, you know, existentially, the hazards of Biblical Fundamentalism. The signs in the Fourth Gospel point to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They set out to communicate an important truth about Him: the first of them happens at Cana.

Cana was not far: it appears that Jesus' family and the family celebrating a wedding were close friends. So Mary and Jesus were invited to the feast. Wedding feasts lasted for seven days. They must have arrived in the middle or near the end for shortly thereafter the wine ran out. Mary apparently knew her host and hostess well enough to issue an order to their servants. She apparently was on intimate enough terms with them to feel their acute embarassment when the wine ran out. It was she who called it to His attention. "No greater catastrophe could strike the heart of hospitable people hosting so gala an affair" is the way one commentator describes it. It was, obviously, a disaster; not the life or death variety to be sure, but the kind that is extremely and excruciatingly painful when it happens to one.

There is a difficult exchange between Mother and Son when Mary told Jesus about the quandary. The translation is a tenuous one: "O woman, what have you to do with me?" sounds terribly theatrical and slightly irrelevant. What she had to do with Him was that He was her son and a dear friend of hers was in trouble and she wanted Him to do something about it. The sense of what He said was, "Let's not be upset about it."

Jesus told the servants, panicked at this point, to fill six stone jars with water. The author includes an explanatory note for his Gentile readers. The jars were used in the Jewish rite of purification. Several times a day, ordinarily before eating, orthodox Jews would wash their hands. It was a ceremonial act as well as a functional one. When a guest arrived at the party he would wash in the water. These jars were empty too - more evidence that a busy party had been transpiring for several days.

So the harried servants filled the jars with water and I can imagine the way they must have looked at one another as they did it: somehwere between 120 and 180 gallons. It was not a task they could have performed discretely.

The fact that the author is singularly uninterested in the mechanics, the chemical transition and the awesome implications for physical science, of what happened next is indicated by his total neglect. He is frustratingly silent about that matter which concerns us first: "How did it happen?"

The steward was summoned. A professional maitre d', he was persuaded to take the first sip and discovered immediately that it was wine - very good wine, in fact. A touch of pedestrian humor emerges at this point. The professional puffs up his chest and gently chides his employer; "This isn't done: you don't keep the best wine till last. You are supposed to serve it first, and after your guests have drunk freely you bring out the mediocre, less expensive wine." Nobody, it is assumed, will know the difference. And the wedding party continued, fueled now by 120 or so gallons of new and superb wine - with Jesus and His friends as guests, participants, co-celebrators. That is the "first sign", according to the author of the Fourth Gospel.

To what, now let us ask, does it point us in 1977? Not, I trust, to itself; not to a literalistic fascination with a carpenter who does magic tricks in order to prove His authority. Our habitual focusing on the sign is one of the reasons people of common sense and intellectual integrity find our religion hard to swallow. To what, then, does if point?

First, I would submit that this sign points to the direction of that most incredible of assertions: namely, that Almighty God is intimately and personally involved in our affairs. The sign, that is to say, points away from God's remoteness. Now that - God's remoteness - seems at times to be a favorite Presbyterian dogma. It is a product of our theology: we hold out for a God who is God, the omnipotent, awe-some ground of all being and creator of all that is. It has always seemed wrong to us theo logically, and presumptuous socially, to assume too much about our status with Him. We can contemplate, at least, God's concern for World Peace; or perhaps Peace in the Middle East or Northern Ireland. But we have difficulty thinking of God's will in terms of the trouble we're having with a neighbor across the back fence, or the lingering, smoldering conflict under our own roof with our own children. We can contemplate, at least, God's concern for something as vague as world hunger. But we cannot - or will not - see God's compassion for the welfare recipient, shivering in a two room apartment this morning, who will materialize tomorrow in the halls of this Church with whiskey on his breath because it's the only friend left, wanting for God's sake - someone to do something.

Or we can contemplate, at least, something as remote as God's concern for the health and well-being of His people. But we cannot - or will not - understand God's personal concern for our guilt, our anxiety, our grief - or even our joy.

The sign of Cana is Jesus, getting Himself involved in a problem that is at best, trivial, peripheral. An embarassing situation for the host, to be sure, but hardly more than irritating to anyone else. That, I think, is precisely the point. God cares about us, and what matters most to us. There is nothing trivial in His eyes about something that causes us to be hurt.

That's the miracle beside which water turning into wine pales in drama: the mysterious, holy God came among us in the flesh; in the life of a man who cared about things like the wine running out.

The sign of Cana points us in the direction of a God who can turn stale ritual into something delectable and exciting and lively. That is to say, it points

away from the grimness of much public religion. Again, we Presbyterians are vulnerable. Our strength has been our theology; a faith that appeals to mind as well as heart - only sometimes it is mind instead of heart; a religion that does not have to retreat from the rarified atmosphere of the academy. If we have been solemn it has been for good reason. We have done theology and done it well. But in process we are guilty, I believe, of too much solemnity: we are so dignified that sometimes we bore - even ourselves. Soren Kierkegaard, theologian and gadfly, said a lot in an observation that goes something like this: "where Jesus changed water into wine, we have done something more difficult. We have changed the wine back into water."

Jesus took those ceremonial jars and used them to keep a party going. He took the water of religious ritual and made it into something with which people could celebrate. Kierkegaard observed that institutional religion seems bent on reversing the process.

John the Baptist wouldn't have been caught dead at an affair that featured 120 gallons of good wine. Neither would the most vocal and therefore most conspicuous contemporary Christians. Along the way of our two thousand year history we Christians have flirted constantly with that old Greek idea that religion and pleasure - physical pleasure, eating, drinking, feeling-good pleasure - are mutually exclusive. You can do one or the other but not both. We don't articulate it, but somewhere deep within us we harbor the suspicion that we are nearest God's will for us when we're feeling bad. It is simply an alien idea that the God who willingly stands by us in suffering also gladly graces our high and joyful moments.

Our public religion reflects it: we turn the wine of the Gospel into the tepid water of piety. We assume that the essence of religiosity is in the repetition of ritual and the preservation of tradition. And it should come as no surprise to us that the young who are both more free and more honest than we, tell us that sometimes when they sit through our worship - our corporate celebration of God's love - they get bored.

How would you paint the face of God? This sign points to a God who can laugh, deeply, heartily; a God with a twinkle in His eye, who approves whenever His gift of life is affirmed and enjoyed. Certainly our historic Presbyterian penchant for solemnity and dignity has merit: but not to the degree that our God appears grim. For here is His son at a party - with old and good friends, sharing their joy at one of the truly important and happy events in life. Certainly ours is a religion of Crucifixion: but it is also a religion that needs to be expressed with other symbols as well - such as a wedding feast.

The Old Testament Lesson this morning alludes to it. Israel is back from exile: Jerusalem is reestablished and the prophet wrote: "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." (Isaiah 62:5). The allusion sounds a bit chauvinistic, to be sure, but can you remember it, men? Can you remember that incredible moment of pure love when you stood in the front of the church and looked back and saw her coming down the aisle - your bride? The intensity of that moment: that moment of utter joy is a little like God's attitude toward us.

The sign of Cana points to a God who is in the business of changing people. George Eliot expressed impatience with "those whose celestial intimacies seem not to improve their domestic manners". The power of the Gospel has always been adulterated by the fact that it seems to have made no difference in the lives of many of its

adherents. The sign of Cana, however, points to a God who has the power to transform your life and mine; to take the luke warm water of our spirits and turn it into zestful, sparkling wine.

On the broad, global scale, we need the occasional reminder that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has powerfully influenced the history of civilization. Professor William Barclay is fond of reminding his readers that Christianity has profoundly influenced western history by holding out at critical points for the dignity and worth of the individual. In pre-Christian Rome, for instance, forty infants were abandoned on the steps of the Forum nightly to be collected each morning: the boys to be raised in the school for gladiators; the girls in brothels.

We have not always done it: sometimes we have been the heaviest weight to be removed from the status quo. But at some very important junctures of history the people of Jesus Christ have stood firmly and magnificently transformed the future. I think historians will one day say that about the 1960's. It was the considered and scholarly opinion of the late Reinhold Niebuhr that the Civil Rights Movement was the only thing that saved the American Church from total irrelevance.

But it is at the personal level that we have the most difficulty following this sign. Jesus took water and made wine. He took a group of people, took the raw material of their lives and remade them, recreated them, as joyful, courageous servants. That's the destination to which the sign of Cana is pointing.

We try to keep it at arm's length. We're not sure about it. We're not sure we want to be disturbed, changed, recreated. We may not be altogether happy with who we are, but we are uncomfortable with the very suggestion that God might make us into something else.

Frederick Nietzsche stood outside the faith throwing his brilliant barbs at the lack of integrity he observed at precisely this point. He wrote: "They must sing better songs ere I learn belief in their savior: his disciples must look like the saved." (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p.494).

That's the issue and always will be. We approach it weekly: at the conclusion of our corporate Prayer of Confession the Minister sometimes says: "If a man is in Christ he is a new person altogether: the past is gone: everything is fresh and new."

When last did you allow your religion to touch you as deeply as that declaration implies? When last were you moved to tears of joy at God's love for you: or to an act of lonely courage or quiet sacrifice because of that same love for all people? We're embarassed by intense religion that makes a difference: we're skeptical about the honest simplicity that says, "I belong to Jesus Christ and I mean to be His disciple."

And so Pentecostal Churches are full, and we sit smugly in half-empty Sanctuaries. And across the world intense Pentecostalism is experiencing phenomenal growth, as the Presbyterians bring home another hundred missionaries. "We will be listened to," John Arthur Gossip once remarked, "when we demonstrate to those outside that we have something infinitely valuable that they lack." (Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p.494). The sign of Cana points to a God who is involved, radically, in our life; a God who graces our high moments and is pleased when His gift of life is affirmed and enjoyed. God can enrich our lives - bringing peace, meaning, great joy. He can change us. That is the Gospel. Amen.